



Berglund, O. (2020). Building revolutionary subjectivity: creative tensions in the Plataforma de Afectados por La Hipoteca. *Globalizations*, 17(5), 854-868.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1722497>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):  
[10.1080/14747731.2020.1722497](https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2020.1722497)

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**Building Revolutionary Subjectivity: Creative Tensions in the *Plataforma de Afectados por La Hipoteca***

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**Abstract**

The paper assesses the Spanish housing activists *Plataforma de Afectados por La Hipoteca* (PAH, Platform for the Mortgage-Affected) as an example of left-wing convergence. From the perspective of the horizontal democratic practices and civil disobedience tactics they adopt, the paper acknowledges the anarchist, Marxist and reformist influences in PAH and reveals how the creative tension between activists of different persuasions has aided the movement's relative success. In harnessing and transforming the revolutionary subjectivity of the movement of the squares in 2011, PAH has in turn led to a broader urban radical politics. This new revolutionary subjectivity captures PAH's legacy and positioning within broader anti-austerity politics.

**Key Words**

PAH, Anarchism, Marxism, Social Movements, Civil Disobedience

**Word Count**

7,945 words

## Introduction

The *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca* (PAH, Platform for the Mortgage-Affected) has been campaigning for a right to housing and debt alleviation for the hundreds of thousands of Spanish households that have faced the threat of eviction and life-long indebtedness since the start of the 2008 crisis. It is largely made up by people who are themselves affected by the housing crisis. PAH was founded in Barcelona in 2009 by a core group of activists previously involved in *V de Vivienda*, which protested the gentrification and lack of access to housing for young people in the city. PAH has been a national movement since 2011 and has 200 local groups across the country but remains stronger in Catalonia. Famous for its civil disobedience, PAH uses three main forms of nonviolent law-breaking: physically stopping evictions, temporarily occupying bank branches and organising squatting in empty housing belonging to banks. Alongside these practices, PAH campaigns to change housing and debt policy nationally and regionally.

This Spanish anti-eviction housing movement with high levels of public support (2013a, 2013b, 2013c) has caught the attention of scholars (Álvarez de Andrés, Zapata Campos, & Zapata, 2015; Barbero, 2015; Flesher Fominaya, 2015b; Flesher Fominaya & Jimenéz, 2014; Marti & Fernandez, 2015; Ordóñez, Feenstra, & Tormey, 2015; Romanos, 2013), international news media (BBC, 2014; e.g. NY Times, 2013) and political activists across the world. The movement's political significance can be seen in the election of PAH co-founder and one-time spokesperson, Ada Colau, as mayor of Barcelona in 2015. As such, understanding what allows this combination of radical politics and broad public support is essential for any exploration of the possibilities for left-wing convergence (Prichard & Worth, 2016). The research is based on 31 interviews with PAH activists, 10 observations of assemblies in different PAH groups in the greater Barcelona area, 11 observations of acts of civil disobedience and 3 visits to buildings occupied by PAH.

PAH's 'principles of anti-hierarchy and direct action' have led some scholars to claim the movement as 'small-a' anarchist (Ordóñez, Feenstra, & Franks, 2018, p. 87) whilst Marxists see it as a response to 'a crisis of the reproduction of the working class' (Charnock, Purcell, & Ribera-Fumaz, 2014, p. 115). Others have accused its activists of being reformist rather than revolutionary. Without doubt, observers can probably find whatever they are looking for in a movement as large and diverse as PAH. But in this paper I argue that the anarchist influence in the movement, the Marxist analytical frames, and reformist proposals of PAH, reveals the creative influences and tension between activists of different persuasions that has aided the movement's relative success. What emerges is a new, hybrid 'revolutionary subjectivity' (Kiersey & Vradi, 2016, p. 84), that positions PAH within broader anti-austerity politics.

In the first section, I address the anarchist credentials of PAH's internal democracy. As is the case for many contemporary social movements, horizontality is an essential part of PAH's practices. Although PAH is influenced by anarchist horizontality, its approach to leadership is pragmatic and open to what Hardt and Negri call 'tactical leadership' (Hardt & Negri, 2017, p. 19). The second section analyses the politics of disobedience for which PAH has become famous. PAH mediates a creative tension between two traditions of political law-breaking, the anarchist and the liberal, that have intersected historically and do so explicitly in PAH. Anarchist direct action is prefigurative, in that the desired aim ought to be part of the means of protest (Franks, 2003, p. 20). Likewise, anarchists do not believe that people have a 'moral duty to obey territorial state laws' (Wiley, 2014, p. 5). In turn, for practitioners of liberal civil disobedience, as for PAH, law-breaking can only be justified if it is a last resort and takes place within a general respect for the law but against specific unjust and illegitimate laws (Brownlee, 2012; Rawls, 1971). These two traditions have been used to claim and inspire the same instances of disobedience in the past and both figure within PAH,

enriching the movement. Nevertheless, it is the liberal framing and justification of civil disobedience that prevails in PAH, and this has helped them achieve broader societal acceptance and support.

The closing section moves the analysis from PAH's seemingly reformist demands to its place within a broader trajectory of anti-austerity movements. I here argue that PAH has developed a new revolutionary subjectivity, that emerges out of their situated experience. This is my contribution to the discussion of left convergence. On the one hand, PAH has politicised thousands of people experiencing the Spanish housing crisis first hand, helping them to develop an anti-neoliberal revolutionary subjectivity. On the other hand, PAH has played a central part in building a potentially revolutionary movement that seeks to confront and transform political institutions and actors. The paper concludes that this broad left-wing convergence has served PAH well. It has attracted radical activists experimenting with potentially revolutionary forms of protests whilst incorporating those radical practices in discourses, politics and campaigns that enjoy a high level of legitimacy amongst the general public.

### **Tactical Leadership and Horizontality**

PAH's democratic practices pose important questions about how horizontal and leaderless a policy-focused social movement can and should be. Like most contemporary social movements in Spain and elsewhere, PAH aspires to anti-hierarchical and horizontal democratic practices, opposed to the hierarchical or vertical ones practised by traditional political parties (Feenstra, 2015). As others have argued in relation to the Global Justice Movement (Epstein, 2001; Graeber, 2002), Occupy (Gibson, 2013) and 15M (Flesher Fominaya, 2015a), the deliberative participatory democracy that has developed in these movements owes much to anarchist and autonomous traditions. Being careful not to claim

these movements as explicitly anarchist, many authors distinguish between capital-A and small-a anarchists where the former identify as anarchists and the latter are consciously or unconsciously influenced by anarchist traditions (e.g. Graeber, 2002; Ordóñez et al., 2018). Focusing on the Spanish context, Flesher Fominaya distinguishes autonomous social movements (small-a anarchists) from institutional left organisations, highlighting the role of democratic processes and structures.

Autonomous actors distinguish themselves from the practices of the institutional left, rejecting representative democracy and majority rule and instead defending more participatory models, based on direct democracy and self-governance, horizontal (non-hierarchical) structures, decision-making through consensus (if possible and necessary), in the forum of an assembly (usually open), and rarely with permanent delegations of responsibility. Autonomy refers not only to internal organizing principles and structures but also crucially to independence from established political parties and trade unions, and autonomous movements distinguish themselves from the more vertical institutional left model of representative politics (Flesher Fominaya 2015a, p.145).

PAH embodies these ideals. Leading PAH members often refer to their democratic ideals and practices as ‘horizontal’, ‘transparent’, ‘non-hierarchical’, ‘participatory’ and ‘inclusive’ (Interviews ErM; LD; AV; EIM; AJ; SaC), thereby using terms that have been developed in social movements in Europe as well as the Americas for at least three decades (Flesher Fominaya 2015a; Polletta 2002; Reiter 2009).

All the local PAH groups that I visited were committed to ‘horizontal’ ‘non-hierarchical’ structures and open assemblies. They make decisions in assemblies where participants sit in a circle and where the people coordinating the meetings vary from one week to the next.

People who otherwise take on leadership roles often make a conscious effort not to dominate the assemblies. Moreover, there is a conscious effort to be inclusive and overcome barriers to participation (Observations AB1; AB2; AS1; AS2; AT1). The local group in Sabadell is a good example of non-hierarchical and inclusive organisation. PAH Sabadell holds its weekly assemblies in a large hall owned and run by the local council and attracts between 200 and 300 people. The participants sit on chairs in a rectangular shape with open space in the middle. The front row is dominated by parents with babies and pushchairs. There are few older children present as people take it in turns to run the crèche in an adjacent room. Though there are groupings, the pattern is one of diversity. The gender balance is roughly even and the age gap is wide, with most participants being between 30 and 70. Apart from the many Spaniards in the room, there are also significant numbers of Latin Americans and North Africans, as well as some people from sub-Saharan Africa. That Sabadell has many Ecuadorian and Moroccan inhabitants is reflected in the PAH assembly (Observations AS1; AS2).

PAH is also committed to independence from established political parties. As a result, those PAH activists that have entered institutional politics in Catalonia have left PAH (Interviews CM; LD). Infighting between different local PAH groups is often based on the extent to which they live up to horizontal ideals (Interviews ELM; AV; AJ; LD). The understanding and implementation of democratic ideals vary between local PAHs, and comes into conflict with the demands on leadership in the movement. Claiming to strive toward diminishing hierarchies and encouraging wider participation is something that they have in common but different views of leadership became clear when internal critique came up in interviews. One interview respondent objected to the fact that Ada Colau was, until she left in 2014, the spokesperson of the whole movement. This respondent brought their experiences with the deliberative and consensus-based practices of 15M in a different part of the country to their

activism in PAH (Interview AV).

PAH Barcelona was also criticised for its relationship to the Non-Governmental Organisation Observatorio DESC, which has employed several PAH activists, who have then been allowed to dedicate a significant number of working hours to PAH activities. Several other activists have gained employment in Barcelona en Comú and the local administration upon leaving PAH (Blanchar, 2015). In this critique PAH Barcelona was accused of having ‘revolving doors’ that PAH and other actors accuse the political and economic elites of having (Interview ELM). PAH Barcelona also stands out in that it has a ‘coordination committee’. The larger PAH groups are divided into committees dedicated to everything from house occupations to mutual support or domestic violence, but PAH Barcelona is the only one that has a coordination committee that sits above the others in terms of steering the tactical and political activities. In that sense, PAH Barcelona have more hierarchical structures than others. However, even there, there has been a move away from having permanent spokespeople to temporary ones linked to specific campaigns.

The question many bring to issues such as these is whether the defence of autonomy and the antipathy towards leadership in contemporary social movements is an obstacle to effective organisation (e.g. Castells, 2012; Dean, 2013, 2016). As we can see, movements often produce unaccountable *de facto* leaders and ‘conceals hierarchies’ rather than doing away with them (Kiersey & Vradi, 2016, p. 87). Even the most anarchistic 15M and Occupy movements are open to such criticisms. As Jodie Dean has argued (Dean, 2016), prioritising the form of political organisation over the content makes institutions less efficient, and PAH has clear aims, reformist as many of them are. Furthermore, the horizontality vs. verticality debate, which takes place both within social movements and amongst those who write about them, is also a debate about trade-offs between democracy and efficiency (Bailey, 2019, pp.



8–9). Full horizontality makes delivering the policy aims PAH has highly inefficient.

The extent to which horizontality can conceal hierarchies rather than do away with them became apparent during observations and interviews. The existence of cliques or groups within the group compromise the commitment to openness and transparency since they deny wider access to *de facto* decision-making spaces. In the large PAH group in the Catalan town Terrassa, one respondent told me that, ‘there is one committee that is not on the official list but that has a lot of influence and that is the bar committee’ (Interview JA). He was referring to that amongst those who often went to the bar after the meeting, many were leading voices and they discussed issues around which they reached common views that they then brought back to the assembly. Such a consensus among several leading members then made it difficult for anybody who disagreed to win the argument. In Sabadell, in turn, a group consisting of mainly young men with links to other radical left groups seemed equally well prepared and dominated the meeting, making it a challenge to come with an opposite viewpoint (Observation AS1; AS2). There are in other words daily compromises with anti-hierarchical ideals that makes the movement more efficient but also more susceptible to critique from activists with stronger autonomous or anarchist preferences.

One way to understand the leadership expressed in the PAH movement is to borrow from Michael Hart and Antonio Negri (2017). They understand movement leadership as tactical, rather than strategic. They put strategy in the hands of the multitude at large, while tactical ‘leadership should be limited to short-term action and tied to specific occasions [...] occasional, partial, and variable’ (2017, p. 19). PAH’s use of ‘tactical leadership’ and daily struggles with obstacles to inclusivity and horizontality pushes the label of small-a anarchist to its limit. Whilst recognising that the ideal of horizontality has anarchist origins, PAH looks more hierarchical than 15M or Occupy did. The same scepticism towards accepting PAH’s

practices as those of a small-anarchist movement applies to its direct action.

### **Anarchist Direct Action and Liberal Civil Disobedience**

PAH pursues what might be understood as a dual strategy of prefigurative legitimising.<sup>1</sup> This involves PAH legitimising their actions in two ways that are not mutually exclusive in practice. The first method is to focus on protesting the specific injustice of housing policy, rather than society as a whole, or capitalism in general, through the practice of civil disobedience. The second involves adopting anarchist prefigurative politics to that end. The tension in this approach deserves some unpacking both conceptually and empirically.

As an ideal type, anarchist direct action is not necessarily nonviolent. Indeed, the anarchist Peter Gelderloos (2007) has argued that nonviolence is co-opted by the state and that violence is sometimes therefore necessary. Nevertheless, most direct action practised in contemporary anarchist social movements does not use violence against people, though destruction of property is common (Graeber, 2002, 2009). Anarchist direct action is also prefigurative, rather than ends-directed, symbolic or constitutional (Maeckelbergh, 2011; Yates, 2015). In prefigurative direct action there should be an ‘attempted construction of alternative or utopian social relations in the present’ (Yates, 2015, p. 1) as part of the means of realising the end goal. In other words, process (rather than outcome) is key. Benjamin Franks (2003, p. 18) separates prefigurative direct action from symbolic actions which ‘are those acts that aim to raise awareness of an issue or injustice, but by themselves do not attempt to resolve it’. Most forms of protest are symbolic in this sense because there is generally no connection between what is being demanded and what is being practised, the Extinction Rebellion protests in London during spring 2019 being a case in point. Lastly, Franks identifies constitutional direct action, in this case housing activists too, who ‘regard

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Alex Prichard for suggesting this formulation.

the lobbying of parliament to raise the question of housing provision as the most appropriate form of action' (Franks, 2003, p. 20). The latter is a case of representative politics which most anarchists disavow.

While anarchists generally locate the legitimacy of their civil disobedience in process, for liberal theorists civil disobedience must be strictly non-violent if it is to be legitimate (e.g. Bedau, 1969; Rawls, 1971). To ensure legitimacy, liberal civil disobedience should always be a last resort to be employed when all other means have failed to make a difference. For Rawls (1971, p. 373), it is a condition for civil disobedience 'that the normal appeals to the political majority have already been made in good faith and that they have failed'. This is because for liberals, unlike anarchists, breaking the law is an extreme act that should only be considered once legal routes have been attempted and 'further attempts may reasonably be thought fruitless' (1971, p. 373). Likewise, Kimberley Brownlee argues that 'civil disobedience may be justifiable as a matter of necessity only when lawful efforts have repeatedly shown the majority to be immovable or apathetic to this legitimate cause' (Brownlee, 2012, p. 200).

In an effort to separate liberal civil disobedience from anarchist direct action, liberal thinkers have highlighted how actions that break a specific law should also maintain a 'fidelity to law' (Rawls, 1971, p. 366) on the whole. For example, Martin Luther King (1969, p. 79) claimed to have 'the very highest respect for the law' despite breaking segregation laws. Civil disobedience must also be public, nonviolent and accepting of the legal consequences. This, Rawls argues, 'helps to establish to the majority that the act is indeed politically conscientious and sincere, and that it is intended to address the public's sense of justice' (Rawls, 1971, pp. 366–367). Fidelity to law shows society as the target audience that the aims of civil disobedience are reformist, rather than revolutionary. Moreover, fidelity to law is also expressed through appeals to higher laws. To claim to conduct civil disobedience is to appeal to a higher justice (Rawls, 1971, p. 383), a higher moral right (Brownlee, 2012, Chapter 4;

Singer, 1974, p. 64) or a higher law, such as a constitution (Arendt, 1973, p. 60). This stands in stark contrast to the anarchist's fidelity to prefiguration and a rejection of such deontological claims (for more on this topic see Wiley 2014; Cornell, 2016, pp. 220–222).

### ***PAH's Creative Tension***

Unlike most other cases of political protest, PAH's civil disobedience is often aimed at achieving direct results. Most evictions that PAH tries to stop are postponed. In a worst-case scenario it buys the family another few months in their home, but in other cases the bailiffs never come back, and the family is able to reach a medium-term solution with the bank or local authority. Bank sit-ins, whilst far from always successful, do sometimes succeed in forcing the bank to negotiate one or several cases of debt alleviation and social housing. PAH's project of supporting families in occupying bank-owned housing is called *Obra Social* (translating as Social Work or Social Project), a name borrowed from the bank *La Caixa's* program of letting some properties out at lower rents. *Obra Social* also has an instrumental purpose whereby the direct result is that one or more homeless households obtain somewhere to live, even if this is initially on insecure terms. It is the combination of clear demands and disobedience that makes success possible, making these protests more than just symbolic civil disobedience.

There are prefigurative elements to PAH's disobedience evident in the methods deployed. Both the Stop Evictions campaign and *Obra Social* are prefigurative forms of protest in the sense that ends and means are congruent. One of PAH's legislative demands are a stop to evictions where there is no adequate alternative housing offered. The end of stopping all such evictions is then congruent with the means of physically stopping any given eviction where this is the case. Another demand is the expansion of social housing partially through using empty housing belonging to banks (Berglund, 2018; PAH, 2015a). The end of putting a large

stock of empty bank-owned housing to social use is congruent with occupying an empty bank-owned building and enabling previously evicted families to move in.

PAH emerged in Barcelona and Catalonia, a region with a rich history of disobedience. Anarchism has a long history in Catalonia and Barcelona and the city has been dubbed ‘the most revolutionary city in Europe’ (Ealham, 1995, p. 133). Whilst violent protest has been part of the history of anarchism and other revolutionary currents in Catalonia, so have the occupation of space in the form of sit-ins and house occupations (Esenwein, 1989; Smith, 2007). To be sure, none of the leading PAH members that I interviewed in Barcelona – the architects of PAH’s practices and discourses – mentioned the Catalan anarchist tradition as an inspiration for direct action. Nevertheless, it is easy to see how amongst different repertoires of action, nonviolent law-breaking was a viable option for a Catalan movement. Even the Catalan right have engaged in forms of nonviolent disobedience during periods of dictatorial Spanish repression (Balcells, 1996) and the current independence movement that spans across the political spectrum also famously breaks Spanish laws.

Today’s Catalonia has many occupied social spaces and established squats, carrying on a disobedient tradition of occupying space (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014). Hence, even if these were not direct inspirations for the architects of PAH’s disobedience, other activists who join PAH come from these more anarchist environments (Interview EIM). Moreover, those broader conditions have meant that the civil disobedience practised by PAH in Catalonia has met much less repression than it has in Madrid where more violent evictions take place even when PAH activists try to get in the way (Interview LD). This has allowed PAH to experiment with forms of direct action without the same risk of repression that would likely have been the case elsewhere, not least physically stopping evictions and occupying empty housing.

For PAH, the two prefigurative campaigns, Stop Evictions and *Obra Social*, are connected in a creative tension to the constitutional campaign of seeking to achieve legal changes. An example here is the different priorities of the more liberal PAH Barcelona and the more radical PAH Sabadell. The group in Sabadell has been one of the drivers of *Obra Social* and occupied more empty buildings than most others. For their leading members, large scale occupations are the best way of making gains in the housing question and they criticised the Barcelona group's excessive dedication of time and effort to legal changes (Interviews AJ; ELM). However, it is those efforts to achieve legal changes that lent legitimacy to the occupations because the constitutional campaign shows that occupations are a last resort and therefore legitimate.

For PAH as a whole, civil disobedience as a last resort, rather than prefigurative strategy, brings a degree of popular legitimacy to the movement. Stopping an eviction is presented as a last resort, when 'the attempts to negotiate with the bank, the administration and the courts have been exhausted' (Colau & Alemany, 2012, p. 223). The same logic is at play when deciding who can move into an *Obra Social* building, since the household has to prove that all other means of getting housing have been exhausted (Interviews AJ; ELM). The most illuminating example of the 'last resort' discourse, and its role in building legitimacy, is the 2012-13 national campaign to change the laws around evictions and mortgage-repossessions. Through collecting a million and a half signatures in support of its citizen's legislative initiative (*Iniciativa Legislativa Popular*, ILP), PAH claimed to have 'exhausted all the channels that the system offers' (Colau & Alemany, 2013, p. 65). The *escraches* – protests brought to the front doors of the homes and offices of politicians – that followed were intended to undermine the untouchability of the ruling party MPs, partly through referring to them as 'your lordships' (ibid 2013, p. 9), and the lack of legitimacy of the unresponsive

Spanish party political system. *Escraches*, *Obra Social* and Stop Evictions are therefore all partly justified as a last resort.

The mutually supportive anarchistic and liberal forms of politics allow different activists to pursue different priorities but the tension between them have at times led to splits. For activists in Sabadell, the liberal discourse allows them to pursue radical politics on a scale that would otherwise be unlikely to enjoy the same levels of public support (Interview AJ). For activist in Barcelona, occupying buildings becomes a way of putting pressure on policymakers to make legal changes (Interview LD). Nevertheless, such different priorities caused a split within PAH Barcelona in 2017 when their own *Obra Social* committee sought to loosen the last resort criterion both in the discourse and in practically deciding who was legitimately eligible for *Obra Social* (Interviews AV; SM). The result was that the seceding members left PAH and set up an alternative social movement, which with the risk of causing confusion is called *Obra Social Barcelona*. Their webpage makes no mention of occupation as a last resort and their only legislative demand is to decriminalise occupation (Obra Social Barcelona, 2018). It is in that sense much more prefigurative, less liberal and constitutional and more anarchist.

PAH's dominating discourse around disobedience conforms to the Rawlsian notion of fidelity to law where specific laws are broken in order to strengthen higher laws. This is evident in often repeated references to how the human right to housing has been enshrined in the Spanish constitution (e.g. Colau & Alemany, 2012, p. 27; Comando Video, 2014), as well as references to rulings by the European Court of Human Rights and reports and statements by UN and EU representatives that contradict Spanish mortgage and home repossession legislation (e.g. Colau & Alemany, 2012, p. 124, 2013, p. 92). The grounds for contesting the legitimacy of the law and lawmakers are derived from PAH's claim that these laws are incompatible with the higher natural right, as the following quote shows:

Stopping an eviction, defying a court order, is an act of civil disobedience. Actively disobeying laws that are considered unjust is not only a right, but a duty of the population. A disobedience which is supported by a superior legality, systematically violated by the Spanish state: the human rights (Colau & Alemany, 2012, p. 124).

Although there is a deep critique of how Spanish representative democracy works, PAH's overall campaign is one which seeks to secure the right to housing within the current institutional setup and which engages government on all levels, while pursuing direct action too. This campaign ranges from enforcing fines on banks for possessing empty properties in local administrations to appeals to the European Parliament and Court of Human Rights to put pressure on the Spanish government. There is then a liberal fidelity to law, conforming to a 'social democratic politics rest[ing] on the capacity to persuade a majority' (Bailey, 2019, p. 8).

*Obra Social* is not, as is claimed by several contributors to an edited volume on squatting in Europe, part of a broader alternative to capitalism (Cattaneo & Martínez, 2014). As that book shows, Catalonia has a long tradition of squatting as part of an anarchist movement. But the branding and organisation of *Obra Social* as a social housing project, rather than a squat, was a deliberate move away from these anarchist *Okupas* (Interviews LD; CM). *Obra Social* is undoubtedly PAH's most disobedient form of protest, contesting the rights of banks to use their property the way they want, but it is not PAH policy to oppose property rights *per se*. In other words, PAH is not explicitly anti-capitalist. It is much more concerned with its own public legitimacy and support from the general public than are conventional squatter movements.

The aim of any *Obra Social* is stated as the legalising of living arrangements. This does not involve PAH or the household seeking legal ownership of the property, but instead the goal is



for the occupants to become social tenants to the bank or local authority, paying an affordable rent (Obra Social la PAH, 2013). That is not to say that some PAH activists and people living in *Obra Social* buildings may see those aims as more of a veneer of acceptability than something which they are genuinely striving towards. Some are more likely than not anarchists. In this respect, *Obra Social*, as well as PAH's suggested changes to the law, does challenge how the property rights of banks can be exercised even if they do not explicitly oppose the banks' right to own property. Instead, PAH campaigns for greater state involvement in housing provision since it is the state that manages social housing. Hence, although several *Obra Social* proponents and participants have more anarchist motivations, the broader discourse that they are part of claims to ultimately seek to strengthen the state.

For a movement that prizes legitimacy and support from the public and which wants to be inclusive and broad-based, disassociation in the minds of the general public from anarchist subculture has been important. Such disassociation has been made possible by constructing its actions as civil disobedience, used as a last resort and within wider fidelity to the law. PAH's demands, though deeply transformative, are not revolutionary in an anti-capitalist sense that would satisfy traditional anarchist or Marxist revolutionaries. PAH is neither demanding the end of property rights nor the abolishment of the right of households and institutions to make profit from buying and selling housing. They do seek to restrict property rights by strengthening the rights of mortgaged households against the banks, those of tenants against landlords and those of the public sector against the private sector (PAH, 2015a). They are in that sense reformist rather than revolutionary. That is not to say that were those reforms generalised that this would not be deeply transformative of the existing mode of social reproduction. PAH's reforms would severely limit the profitability of vulture capitalist funds in Spain (Berglund 2018), to the point where they may choose to abandon them.

## **Revolutionary Subjectivity**

Limiting the analysis to PAH's stated demands would be to miss the movement's role in the longer trajectory of anti-austerity politics and in the development of a new revolutionary subjectivity in Europe. In this final section I explore PAH's legacy and significance as part of this longer trajectory.

In a passage particularly apt to understand the revolutionary subjectivities developed in PAH, Hardt and Negri write:

When you bend under the weight of debt...you realize how much the capitalist crisis individualizes and strains the human passion. You are alone, depotentialized. But as soon as you look around, you see that the crisis has also resulted in a being together. In the crisis, indebtedness...designate[s] a collective condition. [...] we are on the decks of the *Titanic*...but we are here together (Hardt & Negri, 2012, p. 32).

The authors here capture the creation of new subjectivities built on common experience, or shared situated experiences (see also Cox & Nilsen, 2014). Whilst in classic Marxist thought, this shared situated experience was based in the factory, contemporary Marxist writers with a focus on resistance and movement building recognise that these shared experiences stretch far beyond the workplace (e.g. Kiersey and Vrasti 2016; Cox & Nilsen, 2014; Hardt & Negri, 2012). This post-Marxist lens foregrounds situated experience and the extent to which it forms part of a longer-term revolutionary movement that stretches beyond housing and debt. The post-Marxist move away from the unitary political subject of the working class to a pluralistic and affective formation of a revolutionary subjectivity is central to grasp left-wing convergence in contemporary social movements.

An early step in the politicisation that my interview respondents experienced, and I witnessed, was to adopt PAH's view that it is not the individuals who are to blame for their

poverty. Rather, the inability to pay a mortgage and the blame for the crisis itself lies with the banks. In other words, they come to understand their situated experience of indebtedness politically. This shift in blame is illustrated in the approach to dealing with the bank that is suggested in the often repeated phrase 'The bank has been our nightmare so far, from now on we are the nightmare of the bank' (Observations AB1; AB2; AB4; AS2; AT1). Through studying their own mortgage agreement, looking for irregularities, affected people tend to discover several so called 'abusive clauses' (PAH, 2015b, p. 35), where the bank has acted outside of the regulatory framework. These abusive clauses come to epitomise the wrong that each individual has suffered by the bank, and they were often brought up by my interviewees. By studying their own mortgage agreements, PAH members developed a form of expert knowledge, giving them confidence to put demands to the bank regarding debt alleviation and social housing provision. Many of my respondents talked passionately about interest rates, charges, taxes and abusive clauses in their mortgage agreements, using advanced technical language (e.g. Interviews SiC; CB; MaM; PS). This newly gained financial expertise often stretches beyond their own mortgage agreement to financial markets. As an example, one former bar worker told me about some of the possible implications of the vulture fund Blackstone buying low-quality mortgages from Spanish banks, possibly including hers (Interview SiC). Through their activism in PAH, these shared situated experiences of indebtedness are understood as part of a broader political economy in which activists struggle both for themselves and for each other, creating a collective subjectivity.

The civil disobedience discussed in the previous section plays an important part in what Cox and Nilsen (2014, p. 6) call 'an active concept of experience'. Here, situated experience is not just what happens to us but also how we understand it and what we do with it, thereby creating new experiences. People who join PAH are participating in civil disobedience from

the beginning. MaM tells how she fondly remembers her first bank occupation as an outlet for anger and frustration.

That first bank occupation was [like a huge relief]. Getting rid of all those fears, feeling all that adrenaline. I ended up really tired but like floating. All that anger that we had inside, there that day we let it go. And I said: My God!, nobody can stop me now. All the fear that I had and now nobody can stop me (Interview MaM).

Civil disobedience, experienced viscerally, then becomes part of politicisation for PAH members and serves as an outlet of frustration and anger channelled towards political demands. Acts of civil disobedience also help to build a common affective revolutionary subjectivity by counteracting the isolation that results from dispossession.

Having your home protected by strangers is understandably an emotional experience. After each eviction is successfully stopped, a family member is encouraged to thank the people who have attended with a few words (Observation D1; D2; D3; D4). Several respondents recounted the bond that experiences such as that created (Interviews SiC; IS; CM), describing a camaraderie that is also therapeutic in the way that it helps to overcome shame and isolation, as well as a motivation to keep coming to assemblies and acts of civil disobedience to in some way pay back or pass on the favour (Interviews CA; MiM; IS). In short, PAH actively built a revolutionary subjectivity and a movement that contests prevailing power relations. The question remains as to whether this subjectivity transcends the particular politics around debt and housing.

In Gramscian terms, PAH has played an important part in a ‘war of positions’, contesting the logic of neoliberalism and austerity, and the dispossession that they entail. Nevertheless, it is doubtful whether a social movement limited to housing and whose stated aims do not directly seek to do away with prevailing power relations can be considered to engage in a ‘war of

movement' in that it refrains from engaging in the formulation of a 'strong ideology' (Worth, 2013, p. 34) that encompasses social and economic power relations as a whole. It is in this respect relevant to look at a survey conducted in PAH Terrassa, one of the larger and more vibrant PAH groups. It showed that, despite being part of an anti-austerity organisation that uses civil disobedience, only a third of the 78 members that participated in the survey considered themselves to be on the left politically (Migliari, 2014, p. 8). Many things can be read into such a finding. In one sense it is evidence of PAH's wide appeal and inclusivity. However, in terms of building a revolutionary subjectivity capable of going beyond the housing question and even beyond PAH's stated demands, it must be considered a limitation. That said, even though only a minority of PAH members develop a more militant revolutionary subjectivity, the movement nevertheless played an important role in the broader 'war of movement' of Spanish, even European, anti-austerity politics.

PAH has played, and perhaps continues to play, an important role in the trajectory of anti-austerity politics. Social movements are not isolated events and there is no such thing as spontaneity (Flesher Fominaya, 2015a). One struggle leads to another as activists are elated, disappointed, united, torn apart and trained in the art of developing tactics and strategies for social change. The founders of PAH were longstanding housing activists. One of them was until recently Mayor of Barcelona and another is a congresswoman. PAH itself became a national movement thanks to the politicisation of Spain during the 15M occupations of public squares (Colau & Alemany, 2012). Many activists went from 15M to PAH and then into the Municipalist platforms across the country and some to Podemos in Congress (Díaz-Parra, Roca, & Martín-Díaz, 2017). Seen as such, beyond what PAH itself may achieve, it has been a training ground for activists as a laboratory for democratic processes, forms of protest, ways of confronting and/or persuading financial, political and mediatic power. It had a

particularly important role in this sense between 15M in 2011 and the formation of Podemos and the Municipalist platforms in 2014-15.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued that PAH achieves a broad left-wing convergence, with influences from both anarchism and Marxism, as well as from more reformist and liberal political traditions. This combination constitutes a creative tension between more or less radical activists that allows for both experimenting with different forms of protest and remaining a legitimate political actor in the eyes of broader society, while creating a new political subjectivity.

I first argued that PAH's approach to leadership and horizontality is less small-a anarchist and more pragmatic and accepting of tactical leadership than many other social movements. Whilst there is certainly an expressed commitment to horizontality and the assembly is the decision-making institution, PAH has experimented with forms of leadership that improve efficiency at some cost to democracy. I then went on to argue that PAH's political law-breaking constitutes a creative tension between anarchist and liberal conceptions of disobedience. This tension allows some activists and local PAH groups to pursue more prefigurative politics whilst others engage more in constitutional forms of protest. However, as the split between PAH Barcelona and *Obra Social Barcelona* shows, this tension can be too strong to exist within one movement, or at least one local PAH group. Lastly, I argued that as part of longer-term anti-austerity politics, PAH has played a role in building a revolutionary subjectivity on shared situated experiences of the crisis. It has therefore played a crucial part of a broader 'war of movement' that goes far beyond the politics of housing and debt.

PAH has served as a laboratory of different modes of organising and protesting; and developing and contributing to counterhegemonic discourses and politics. Drawing on Kiersey and Vradi's (2016) distinction between anarchist focus on space and Marxist focus on time and the building of revolutionary movements, PAH can be seen from both perspectives but its legacy is stronger in the latter. The Municipalist movement in Spain, which has 'the goal of radicalizing democracy, feminizing politics and standing up to the far right' (Fearless Cities, 2017) has built on the urban politics created by 15M and PAH. The Municipalist platforms lost power in many cities in the 2019 local elections and it remains to be seen what becomes of them. PAH's experiences of changing public discourse and gaining broad support for political law-breaking should also serve to inspire other social movements.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant ES/J50015X/1.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Eric Herring and Columba Peoples for comments on earlier drafts, the anonymous reviewers for excellent comments and Alex Prichard and Owen Worth for organising the special issue and helping me improve the argument and contribution. Thanks also to those who attended and commented on the presentation of the paper at the 2017 International Initiative for Promoting Political Economy conference in Berlin, as well as to Nathan Eisenstadt for useful advice.

### **Disclosure Statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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## Appendix: Interviews and Observations

Interviews and observations took place in three larger (Barcelona, Sabadell and Terrassa) local PAH groups, all located in Catalonia.

Key informant (KI) respondents have joined PAH as political activists and take some form of leadership role within the movement. Life history (LH) respondents have joined PAH in order to solve their own housing and debt problems.

### Interviews

Initials	Interview type	Sex	Age	Locality
AJ	KI	M	30s	Sabadell
AV	KI	F	30s	Barcelona
CA	LH	F	30s	Sabadell
CB	LH	M	30s	Sabadell
CM	KI	M	30s	Barcelona
ElM	KI	F	30s	Sabadell
ErM	KI	M	30s	Barcelona
IS	LH	F	40s	Barcelona
JA	LH and KI	M	40s	Terrassa
LD	KI	F	30s	Barcelona
MaM	LH	F	50s	Sabadell
MiM	LH	M	20s	Sabadell
PS	LH	F	30s	Barcelona
SaC	LH and KI	F	30s	Terrassa
SiC	LH	F	30s	Barcelona
SM	KI	M	40s	Barcelona

### Observations

Code	Category	Locality
AB1	Assembly	Barcelona
AB2	Assembly	Barcelona
AB4	Assembly	Barcelona
AS1	Assembly	Sabadell



AS2	Assembly	Sabadell
AT1	Assembly	Terrassa
D1	Eviction	Malgrat del Mar
D2	Eviction	Barcelona
D3	Eviction	Barcelona
D4	Eviction	Barcelona

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